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Georges Dumézil, Ancient German Myths, and Modern Demons

Abstract

The article deals with Arnaldo Momigliano's accusation, in the early 1980's, that Georges Dumézil had harbored pro-Nazi sympathies in the 1930's, and with the ensuing polemics. It is mainly between French and Italian scholars that this polemics took place, throughout the 80's and beyond. With few exceptions, North American and German scholars seem to have taken little interest in the discussion. It involves, however, problems of the highest importance for the epistemology of the contemporary history of religion and the study of mythology, and their close, although often hidden, relationships with rightist ideologies.

The purpose of the article was not to unveil new facts, but rather to present what is known as succinctly and fairly as possible, in order to launch a broader discussion of some of the issues at stake among historians of religion. The main findings do not corroborate Momigliano's (and Carlo Ginzburg's) accusations. Various troubling elements in Dumézil's attitudes and sympathies are better understood in the context of their time. It is perhaps significant that Momigliano, who repeatedly said he knew from experience what a totalitarian regime meant, never referred to his own membership in the Fascist party.

More than ten years after his death, in 1986, Georges Dumézil remains a puzzling figure. His name is associated with fields of study as broad and diverse as Caucasian languages on the one hand, and religion and mythology as reflected in Sanskrit, Roman or Norse literatures on the other. He was an immensely prolific writer, whose works remain almost always highly technical, and whose theory on the »three functions« as expressed in various literatures written in Indo-European languages has received huge attention in wide milieus, although mainly in the French speaking world. It has been applied to various later societies, in particular to the western medieval, feudal world.¹ A recent book even argues for its applicability to

¹ For a good synthetic presentation of Dumézil's œuvre, see D. Dubuisson, *Mythologies du XX^e siècle* (Dumézil, Lévi-Strauss, Éliade), Lille 1993. Cf. the review of Ph. Borgeaud in *Revue d'Histoire des Religions* 212, 1995, 499-503. In the preparation of these pages, I have greatly benefited from the friendly help of Cristiano Grottanelli and Steven Wasserstrom. I have also benefited from conversations with Riccardo Di Donato, Carlo Ginzburg, Anthony Grafton, Charles Malamoud, Maurice Olender, John Scheid, and Mark Silk. I also wish to express my thanks to Bruce Linclon, who, upon receiving (from the editors of the ZfR) the penultimate version of this article, took the initiative of a very fruitful correspondence with

the »semitic« world, whatever this expression may mean.² Dumézil's trifunctionalism was perceived as reflecting »deep structures« of various societies, not only in the ancient past, but also in the present. Dumézil himself seems to have encouraged, to some degree, the promotion of a few central ideas to this kind of »relevance.«

The influence exerted by Dumézil (in some cases, one may even speak of a »fad« of Dumézil) is not easily explained, even considering the deep impact of structuralism as promoted by Claude Lévi-Strauss on French intellectual life in the sixties and seventies. In the last two decades of his long life, he became one of the recognized luminaries in the Parisian firmament, and was eventually received into the Académie Française by his former colleague of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Lévi-Strauss. It must be pointed out that Dumézil usually succeeded in withstanding the pressures often exerted upon well-known intellectuals by Parisian media, and almost never expressed opinions on political or other current affairs.

It comes as no surprise, then, that when this towering figure was accused by another giant of scholarship, the ancient historian Arnaldo Momigliano, of having harbored pro-Nazi sympathies, this created a turmoil on both sides of the Alps.³ The historian Carlo Ginzburg soon joined the battle, and forcefully sought to substantiate Momigliano's accusation. French scholars and intellectuals, on the other hand, came to Dumézil's help and rejected the accusation as nothing but slander. Much was written, probably too much, and much that was written was of a polemical nature, often using rhetorical rather than factual argumentation.⁴ Except for some isolated splashes in the United States, however, the quarrel seems to have evoked little interest elsewhere.⁵ I do not have any new facts to add to the dossier, but believe that the affair sheds some light on the broader cultural context and ideological implications of contemporary scholarship, in particular when this scholarship deals with ancient religions and mythologies.

First, the facts. In January 1983, Momigliano organized a workshop on Dumézil at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa. The proceedings of the workshop, published

me. I am sadly aware that some of the views expressed here might anger friends on both sides of the Alps, and perhaps on both sides of the Atlantic.

A first draft of this paper was read in October 1996 in Jerusalem, at a Workshop on ideological aspects of the study of religion, organized jointly by the Hebrew University and Tübingen University.

- 2 J. Lambert, *Le Dieu distribué. Une anthropologie comparée des monothéismes*, Paris 1995.
- 3 In a highly interesting piece, unfortunately still unpublished, Thomas Cerbu, from the University of Georgia, has pointed out some striking, although hidden, similarities between Momigliano's and Dumézil's apparently fairly distant scholarly methods and attitudes. According to him, these similarities are reflected in their feud. See Th. Cerbu, »The Scandal of the Antiquarian: Momigliano, Dumézil, and the Perils of Comparative Mythology.« I thank Professor Cerbu for sending me his article ahead of publication.
- 4 The last relevant publications of which I am aware are A. Zambrini, »Georges Dumézil, una polemica«, in: *Rivista di Storia della Storiografia Moderna* 15, 1994, 317-389, and C. Grottanelli's answer, »Un lettore 'supplente' e i trabochetti della polemica«, in: *Rivista di Storia della Storiografia Moderna* 15, 1994, 391-404. See also C. Grottanelli, »Ancora Dumézil: addenda et corrigenda«, in: *Quaderni di Storia* 39, 1994, 195-205.
- 5 According to Hubert Cancik, the leading German historian of Roman religion, the fact that Dumézil is almost ignored in Germany today, and that his works have not been translated into German, has much to do with his ambiguous beliefs in the thirties (oral communication).

in a special issue of *Opus* entitled *Aspetti dell' opera di Georges Dumézil*, are introduced by Momigliano,⁶ who does not hide his great difficulties with various aspects of Dumézil's method in approaching Roman religion. Momigliano emits some doubts over the legitimacy of this method, adding that Dumézil strikes him as having had too much »esprit de système,« at least in some »political matters of the highest importance.«⁷ Twenty years before the beginning of the polemics, Momigliano already considered Dumézil's theories to be »useless.«⁸ More precisely, complaining about »Dumézil's increasing emphasis on mentality rather than institutions,«⁹ Momigliano feels that »scattered traces of trifunctionalism in various Indo-European cultures [are not] a sufficient argument for postulating an original all-pervasive Indo-European trifunctional mentality.«¹⁰

Problems of method counted much for Momigliano, but what seems to have counted even more for him is the fact that Dumézil's *Mythes et dieux des Germains*, [=MDG], a book published in 1939, retains »clear traces of sympathy for Nazi culture (porta chiare tracce di simpatia per la cultura nazista).«¹¹ Or rather, that such traces appear in an author whose methodology is already suspect. It is the combination of both facts that seems to ring the alarm bell. The following year, Momigliano returned to the same accusation, writing: »Any unbiased reader of the first edition of the book by Dumézil, *Mythes et dieux des Germains*, which appeared in 1939, is bound to find in it sympathy with Nazi ideologies. As such, the book was explicitly criticized by Albert Grenier in the *Revue des Etudes Anciennes* 14, 1939, 378-379.«¹² More precisely, Momigliano, goes on, MDG reflects sympathy for the »type de société magico-militaire spécifiquement Germanique« (p. 155 of MDG). Dumézil's sympathies for the French extreme right, supposed by Momigliano (»Dumézil, while remaining the darling of the extreme right, to which he may originally have belonged)¹³, are indeed a fact: before the second world war, he was close to the royalist movement *Action Française*. Moreover, from 1933 to 1935, he wrote (under the *nom de plume* Georges Marcenay) regular chronicles and editorials in *Le Jour*, a daily newspaper identified with the extreme right. These

6 A. Momigliano, »Premesse per una discussione su Georges Dumézil«, in: *Opus* 2, 1983, 329-341.

7 A. Momigliano, »Georges Dumézil and the Trifunctional Approach to Roman Civilization«, in: *History and Theory* 23, 1984, 312-330, here 316. To a great extent, this article represents the English version of Momigliano's main argument in »Premesse.« This article is reprinted in: A. Momigliano, *Ottavo Contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico*, Rome 1987, 135-159, and in his *On Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, Middletown 1987, 289-314.

8 A. Momigliano, in: *Journal of Roman Studies* 53, 1963, 113-114.

9 A. Momigliano, »Premesse...«, 317.

10 A. Momigliano, »Premesse...«, 330.

11 A. Momigliano, »Premesse...«, 329-342, esp. 331.

12 A. Momigliano, »Georges Dumézil and the Trifunctional Approach...«, 315. Momigliano means of course to *REA* 41, 1939, not 14. This is however not the case. A careful reading of Grenier's short but quite positive review shows that what worries its author is, precisely, the strange similarities noticed by Dumézil between the contemporary *Allemands* and the ancient *Germains*: »Avouons que c'est précisément cette sorte d'accord préétabli entre le passé préhistorique et le présent qui nous inquiète.« (379).

13 A. Momigliano, »Georges Dumézil and the Trifunctional Approach...«, 312.

facts were revealed by Didier Eribon, in his recent book-length defense of Dumézil, *Faut-il brûler Dumézil? Mythologie, science et politique*.¹⁴ This is, however, obviously besides the point: monarchist sympathies in the thirties might retain unpleasant connotations, and they certainly reflected a profound distaste for democracy – a distaste then partaken by many intellectuals. They were certainly not, however, quite the same thing as Nazi sympathies.

Momigliano did not specify what was the basis for his accusation, but such a specific argumentation was published, also in 1984, by Carlo Ginzburg, another Italian historian, of a younger generation. Ginzburg, incidentally, like Momigliano, is Jewish, but it should be pointed out here that neither of them, nor anybody else, has ever accused Dumézil of antisemitism. In fact, before the second world war the rabid antisemite Louis-Ferdinand Céline referred to Dumézil and to various colleagues of his at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes as »Juifs... Juifs et contre-Juifs.«¹⁵

In »Mitologia germanica e nazismo: su un vecchio libro di Georges Dumézil«¹⁶ Ginzburg begins by pointing out the new »re-evaluation of rightist culture.« What he means precisely by »cultura di destra« he does not say, although he refers to racism as one of the main ingredients of such a »culture.«¹⁷ For him, the case of Georges Dumézil offers an excellent illustration of the seductive power exerted by this culture in the twentieth century. Referring to *MDG* and to its reception, Ginzburg is certainly able to show what can at best be called the ambiguities of the scholarly discourse on *Männerbünde* in the twenties and thirties (a major example is the Swede Stig Wikander and his analysis of the *bersekir*, the initiatic groups of selected warriors of the Norse sagas). Ginzburg deals, in particular, with Otto Höfler's *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen*¹⁸, a book the basic conclusions of which were accepted by Dumézil. In particular, the parallel between the *bersekir* and the SA, was picked up by Dumézil from Höfler:

»Les considérations qui précèdent (on the *bersekir*) expliquent peut-être en partie certains phénomènes sociaux, parmi les plus récents, de l'Allemagne: le développement, le succès des corps paramilitaires, la dura virtus et les droits des Sections d'Assaut, les formes particulières de police qu'a parfois été tentée d'exercer une jeunesse en uniforme.«¹⁹

I must say that Dumézil's sober language struck me, on first reading, as a rather shocking achievement in the art of understatement, as if he did not realize, in 1939,

14 D. Eribon, *Faut-il brûler Dumézil? Mythologie, science et politique*, Paris 1992, 122 ff.

15 D. Eribon, *Faut-il brûler Dumézil...*, 176-183; cf. P. Vidal-Naquet, in: *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 1-7 Oct. 1992, 114.

16 The article was published in *Quaderni storici*, N. S. 57, 1984, 857-82, and a French translation appeared soon thereafter (*Annales ESC*, 1985, 695-715). I am quoting according to the reprint in C. Ginzburg, *Miti, emblemi, spie*, Torino 1986, 210-238.

17 For obvious historical reasons, the concept of a »cultura di destra« holds a special importance in Italian intellectual life. See for instance F. Jesi, *Cultura di destra*, Milan 1993. I am indebted to Saviero Marchignolli for sending me this interesting publication.

18 A. Höfler, *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen*, Frankfurt a. M. 1934.

19 *MDG*, 90-91, quoted by C. Ginzburg, *Miti...*, 214.

the horrifying dimensions of this kind of *dura virtus*. To be sure, Dumézil could say: »Qu'est ce que c'est que l'âme indo-européenne? Tout ce que je peux vous dire, c'est que ce que j'entrevois du monde indo-européen m'aurait fait horreur.« But it was in 1983 that he pronounced this sentence.²⁰ In any case, Ginzburg is forced to recognize that if Dumézil does not have a single word of moral condemnation for Nazi methods in MDG, neither does he specifically sing their praise.²¹ But Ginzburg's conclusion is a rejoinder to Momigliano's main accusation: one can sometimes see, woven into Dumézil's detached discourse, »an ill-hidden ideological sympathy for Nazi culture (una malcelata simpatia ideologica per la cultura nazista).«²²

It seems to me that these are the important words. Ginzburg did not accuse Dumézil of having belonged, even for a short while, to the French supporters of the Nazis, but of having harbored some sympathies for »Nazi culture.« One should be very precise in making such strong accusations. I do not know what the oxymoron »Nazi culture« is. Nine years later, in a response to Didier Eribon's polemical book in 1993, Ginzburg came back to these accusations.²³ In this article, Ginzburg also willingly points out that Dumézil cannot be accused of antisemitism, and adds: »Il devrait être inutile de rappeler que le nazisme n'a pas été en Europe (circonscrire le débat à la France n'aurait pas de sens) un phénomène global, accepté ou refusé en bloc, une fois pour toutes.« So that would mean that »Nazi culture« refers not to what the Nazis, i. e., the *German* Nazis, understood by »culture«, or even a reference to their »values«, but rather to phenomena which were pervasive throughout Europe in the thirties. To the best of my understanding, it would be more accurate to refer to these phenomena as »extreme right«, »totalitarian right«, or even »fascism«, a word which, in contradistinction to »Nazi« has acquired a generic sense.

The core of Momigliano's and Ginzburg's accusation rests on the last three pages of MDG.²⁴ This text is extremely interesting. Dumézil starts by pointing out that in the last 150 years, one can follow various successful attempts to re-mythicise the old Germanic legends. Since the romantic period, says Dumézil, these legends have become, in the true sense of the word, myths, since they »justify, support and encourage individual and collective behaviour which has all the characters of the sacred.« Wagner is the best example of this re-mythologization, and Wagnerian names and music offered powerful support to German soldiers during the first world war. The Third Reich, then, adds Dumézil, did not have to create its foundational myths; it found them. It is thanks to Germanic mythology, rediscovered in the 19th century, that Hitler was able to conceive a concept of Sovereignty unknown in Germany since Odinn's days. »Neo-pagan« propaganda in the third Reich is indeed interesting for the historian of religion. More interesting, however, is the »spontaneous movement« by which the new German leaders »have

20 In an interview in the *Nouvel Observateur*, quoted by John Scheid, in: *Opus* 2, 352.

21 »... mancano parole di critica o di condanna; mancano però anche parole di elogio o di esaltazione.« (C. Ginzburg, *Miti...*, 214).

22 C. Ginzburg, *Miti...*, 229.

23 *Le Monde des Débats*, Sept. 1993. See *ibidem*, Oct. 1993, for Eribon's response.

24 Cf. MDG, 155-157.

in natural fashion casted their action and reactions in social and mystical moulds, sometimes ignoring their conformity with the oldest German organizations and mythologies.«

Dumézil himself quotes this passage in his refutation of Momigliano's accusations, and adds: »Faire le diagnostic, essayer de comprendre, est-ce approuver, sympathiser?«.²⁵ Dumézil's reaction to the accusation that he had been guilty of covert sympathy for Nazism (or for »Nazi culture«) was virulent. He questioned Momigliano's hidden reasons for his attack, suggesting that these had to do with a scholar's jealousy for a more successful colleague.²⁶ As to Ginzburg, Dumézil refuted what he called »un raisonnement par glissades,« i. e., proceeding through logical errors and by innuendos.²⁷ While admitting to enjoy polemics usually, he expressed his profound distaste for this particular instance of it: »Les Augias tiennent toujours en réserve quelques stalles dans leurs écuries. Hercule se laisserait. Et puis, j'ai d'autres Travaux.«²⁸

In his above-mentioned response to Momigliano, Dumézil said: »Je ne pense pas, même dans le temps de mes débuts, où cela aurait été sans conséquence, avoir jamais employé le mot *Arya*, »Ariens« pour désigner les Indo-Européens.«²⁹ Dumézil's memory betrays him here, as pointed out to me by Cristiano Grottanelli, the author of a very learned and important study of the sources and implications of Dumézil's thought.³⁰ In a book published in 1941, Dumézil writes: »... ce sont les *Indo-Européens*. On dit aussi, les *Aryens*...«³¹ From our perspective, it is hard to imagine that in occupied Paris, such a nonchalant use of »Aryens« could be completely innocent. Hard, but perhaps not quite impossible. Dumézil, as we shall see, was a highly complex figure, and had a very ambiguous attitude towards history, politics, and the contemporary world. In a word, he sometimes behaved and expressed himself as if the ancient myths he was studying had a presence, a reality, an ontic quality clearer than concrete events, which belonged to the world of ephemeral phenomena. With a stretch of the imagination, one may perhaps imagine that Dumézil could refer in 1941 to the ancient Aryans without the thought crossing his mind that at that very moment, the new masters of Europe, self-appointed heirs of the ancient Germans, were selecting millions of »non-Aryans« for extermination. And if this thought crossed his mind, he did not think it worth a footnote, in a work of scholarship. To him, this was apparently irrelevant.

Dumézil himself has described how, as a young man (he was born in 1898), he developed a profound ambivalence toward contemporary realities:

25 G. Dumézil, »Une idylle de vingt ans (à propos de A. Momigliano, »Premesse...«)« in his *L'oubli de l'homme et l'honneur des dieux: esquisses de mythologie*, Paris 1985, 299-318, esp. 309.

26 G. Dumézil, »Une idylle...«, 315.

27 G. Dumézil, »Science et politique: réponse à Carlo Ginzburg«, in: *Annales E.S.C.*, 1985, 985-989.

28 G. Dumézil, *Entretiens avec Didier Eribon*, Paris 1987, 210.

29 G. Dumézil, »Une idylle...«, 303.

30 C. Grottanelli, *Ideologie, miti, massacri. Indoeuropei di Georges Dumézil*, Palermo 1993.

31 G. Dumézil, *Jupiter, Mars, Quirinus*, Paris 1941, 10. Grottanelli intends to deal with the context of this use of »Aryens« in a forthcoming study.

»Très vite, il m'a semblé vain de me soucier de politique intérieure [...]. En fait, dès 1924, le malheur était déjà dans l'air et j'étais sûr que notre génération n'y pouvait rien. Et je suis parti pour Istanbul, où je me suis laissé pénétrer par le sage fatalisme oriental.«³²

It is thus that, from 1925 to 1931, Dumézil taught the history of religions at the University of Istanbul, to which he had been recruited through Mustafa Kemal's attempt to secularize Turkish culture.

In his important monograph (unfortunately impaired by too many polemical overtones), Didier Eribon has shown beyond any doubt that the accusations of sympathy toward Nazism stand on a very flimsy basis. Dumézil, like most of his compatriots, had very little sympathy for Germany and the Germans, after 1933 as well as before. Quoting from some of Dumézil's editorials in *Le Jour*, Eribon was also able to show that they reflected strongly anti-German, i. e., anti-Nazi (although pro-Mussolini) sentiments and perceptions. Most French royalists, indeed, did not like »les boches« more than the average Frenchman did. To further complicate an already complex picture, Eribon reveals that during that same period, in 1936, i. e., at the time of the *Front Populaire*, Dumézil joined a masonic lodge. Under Vichy, this membership was to cost him his job, and only after many efforts of various colleagues and friends (including the pro-fascist classicist Jérôme Carcopino) could he be reinstated.

Eribon has shown that Dumézil did not immerse himself into »Eastern fatalism« as much as he has claimed. Not only was he not completely innocent of political interests. He was also able of a rather intense involvement in worldly affairs. More precisely, Dumézil did not hide his sympathies for a certain kind of right, the royalist *Action Française*, as well as for Mussolini's fascism. In the twenties, he had known Charles Maurras, the chief ideologue of the *Action Française*, and remained through the years a close friend of Pierre Gaxotte, one of the intellectual royalist leaders. In his response to Momigliano, Dumézil pointed out that favoring a kingly regime did not mean a negation of political decency, and that it was after all in a Kingdom that Momigliano himself had found asylum after he had fled fascist Italy. This argument, obviously, is rather glib. It is not quite a regime à l'anglaise that Maurras and his friends sought to establish in France.

Dumézil's intellectual and elective affinities with the radical right in the thirties is perhaps, or probably, what brought Ginzburg to speak of a »feeling of unease hard to define (un sentiment de malaise difficile à définir).«³³ Can one try to understand better the nature of this feeling of unease, by identifying more precisely some key characters of the »cultura di destra?«

Few French royalists of the thirties, probably, were also masons. Great scholars are by definition idiosyncratic beings. And few scholars are able to devote much of their work to Ossetian epos and Indian myths, and at the same time to be regular contributors to a daily newspaper, writing on political urgencies. The period, fraught as it was with terrible threats that all came true, in a way worse than

32 G. Dumézil, *Entretiens...*, 209.

33 C. Ginzburg, in: *Le Monde des Débats*, Octobre 1993.

anybody could have imagined in his worst dreams, did not encourage clarity even in some of the best minds. And a mind trained to reassemble puzzles from the second millenium B. C. was not necessarily acute when dealing with immediate realities.

One might try to go a step further. Perhaps the very fact of sustaining interest in ancient myths and mythologies risks begetting a perception of reality which tends to neglect, ignore, or at least misinterpret concrete realities, the daily behavior of men and women. It is apt to colour the present with the colours of ancient myths, and to seek to decipher in contemporary reality the traces of those myths.

As noted above, the later Dumézil has depicted himself as having ever been careful not to let his political opinions colour his scholarship. About his political views, he said they were bound to change from time to time; they were »de nature, changeantes.« In other words, it seems that Dumézil did not quite trust himself on political matters. One may assume that in a sense (only in a sense), he did not really care. His real passion remained of an intellectual nature, and it is to scholarship that he devoted his long life. After all, and like many colleagues, including Jews, he sought his »rehabilitation« by the Vichy regime, and once he obtained it, he spent the rest of the war years working in his Paris study.³⁴ After all, his momentous discovery of the three functions in Indo-European societies dates of 1938 (of which *MDG* was its first exposition), and the following years were devoted to fully building and checking the theory. For Dumézil, hence, the war years, in occupied Paris, were intellectually very intensive and fruitful.

Writing about another leading historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, whose links in Romania of the late thirties with the fascist *Legion of the Archangel Michael* are indubitable, Philippe Borgeaud can speak of the »inquiétantes passerelles (d'ordre épistémologique) entre le platonisme affiché du *Mythe de l'Eternel Retour* et le militantisme nationaliste des années trente.³⁵« Dumézil, indeed, is not Eliade. The scholarly interests and methods of these two contemporaries and friends were quite different, and so were their ideological connections in the thirties.³⁶ There is no doubt that in Eliade's case these connections are infinitely more dubious than in Dumézil's. As has become quite clear in recent years, thanks to some striking revelations, Mircea Eliade was in pre-war Rumania not only a »fellow traveller« of political movements of the far right, but also their official ideologist. Various highly disturbing pieces written by Eliade himself leave a distinct opprobrium upon his personality. The attempt of some French scholars, however, exemplified in Dubuisson's study, to dissociate Dumézil and Eliade in radical fashion strikes

³⁴ This period in Dumézil's career is well described in D. Eribon, *Faut-il brûler Dumézil...*

³⁵ P. Borgeaud, in: *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 212, 1995, 501. See also P. Borgeaud, »Mythe et histoire chez Mircea Eliade. Réflexion d'un écolier en histoire des religions«, in: *Institut National Genevois, Actes* 37, 1993-94, 33-49. I should like to thank my colleague Shaul Miron for drawing my attention to this fine article.

³⁶ On the intellectual and methodological links between Dumézil and Eliade, see the articles in D. M. Cosi (ed.), *Mircea Eliade e Georges Dumézil*, Padova 1994. Unfortunately, the volume includes no full-fledged study of their ideological attitudes and beliefs. On Eliade's intellectual contacts with fascist ideologists, see further S. M. Wasserstrom, »The Lives of Baron Evola«, in: *Alphabet City* 4-5, 1995, 84-89.

me as rather unsatisfactory. At points, it even seems to reflect some undertones of (perhaps unconscious) cultural chauvinism. Dubuisson detects, rightly to my mind, some connections between Eliade's political choices and some fundamentally disturbing ambiguities in his epistemological principles. The virulent tone of his criticism of Eliade, however, disappears completely when he deals with Dumézil. Dubuisson does not detect here any such ambiguity.

Indeed, I argue that the »worrying bridges« detected by Borgeaud in Eliade's intellectual presuppositions can also be found, to some extent, in Dumézil's case. Although Dumézil does not speak, like Eliade, of a-temporal archetypes, some of his implicit presuppositions are disturbing, and this is perhaps what Ginzburg was referring to when he spoke about »a feeling of uneasiness.« Nowhere does Dumézil offer an intellectual and methodological justification for his deep belief that archetypes detected in pre-historical »Indo-European« societies (in particular, of course, trifunctionalism) somehow reappear in modern societies, independently of men's memory, knowledge or will, to shape these societies in their most essential structures. It is my claim that one can speak of something rather similar to what Borgeaud called Eliade's »Platonism.« This belief is reflected, in particular, in the incriminated few paragraphs of *MDG*, but also elsewhere. For Dumézil, indeed, the fundamental structures of the Nazi state (Partei and Gestapo, Wehrmacht, Arbeitsfront) reflect Indo-European tripartite ideology, without the explicit knowledge of Nazi leaders, and independently of their will. (According to him, incidentally, a similar tripartition of functions is to be found in Soviet society). How come that this ideology retains its structuring power, throughout centuries and even millenia, through radical social and historical changes? In what sense can one speak of modern Germany as reflecting deep structures of ancient Germanic tribes? Moreover, why does an ideology which might have informed pre-historic German tribes reappear more clearly in the Third than in the Second Reich? These pertinent and disturbing questions are raised by the Indologist Charles Malamoud in a few powerful pages, where he detects and states better than anyone else this fundamental problem in Dumézil's thought:

»Par quelles ruses de la raison mythique un archétype trifonctionnel peut trouver au 20e siècle une »claire reviviscence«...? De quelle sorte de vie sont donc doués les archétypes?«

To this problem, Malamoud, who does not shy from speaking of *archétypes* in Dumézil's as well as in Eliade's thought, suggests an answer of his own:

»on se dit que le chercheur, lorsqu'il entreprend d'explorer les rapports entre l'esprit humain et les cultures, fabrique lui-même des mythes.«³⁷

37 Ch. Malamoud, »Histoire des religions et comparatisme: la question indo-européenne« in: *Revue d'Histoire des Religions* 208, 1991, 115-121; this text represents the introduction to a whole issue devoted to Dumézil's indo-european theories; cf. C. Malamoud, »Les Indo-Européens, les femmes et les chemins de la liberté«, in: *Le Temps de la Réflexion* 1, 1980, 443-450. Similarly, notes Malamoud, Freud referred to the theory of pulsions as to »our mythology, as it were.«

In other words, suggests Malamoud, the study of mythology needs itself mythical patterns in order to approach its subject. This fascinating explanation, however, remains unsatisfying. Is it true that all scholars, in their search for the essence of cultures, are bound to create myths? Dumézil, like many other scholars of his generation, postulated the existence of »a soul of nations.« It is perhaps this kind of postulate, of hypostasized collective entities, and of the pre-eminence of such timeless abstractions over concrete realities, this »Platonism,« as it were, that forms the core of »rightist culture.« For such a culture, identity refers fundamentally to the group, rather than to the individual. It should be phrased, essentially, in ethnic and collective terms. In its core, moreover, it comes from times immemorial, and it remains immutable. Such an approach, indeed, still seems to hold sway of many minds and souls. I have suggested above that scholars too deeply immersed in the study of ancient myths sometimes seem to develop a distorted perception of present realities. This explanation, however, might oversimplify a deeply complex reality: it seems sometimes be the case that it is precisely a crooked view of reality which permits one to develop new intuitions about the distant past. One can also do interesting science with dubious feelings. The understanding of contemporary events offered by the »cultura di destra« might be crooked, or even evil; but it does permit insights about the past, such as the power of myths, or of collective identities, which sometimes escape scholars more liberal in their *Weltanschauung*. Indeed, here lies the strong seducing power of this attitude. Much attention has been devoted to the various seductions and aberrations of Leftist intellectuals in western Europe (and to a lesser extent in North America) in the twentieth century, both before and after the second world war (such as the support given to Stalinism or Maoism). Focusing on those who fell prey to the evils of the right, at the end of the cold war and with the return, often ugly and violent, all over the world, of religious and ethnic identity, strikes me as an urgent epistemological desideratum.

In the seventies, Dumézil's thought was »discovered« by some French »new right« intellectuals, in particular by the so-called »nouvelle école,« which sought to offer an intellectually respectable garb to old themes of the racist right, including Nazi para-science.³⁸ To be sure, the reception of Dumézil in dubious milieus is in itself no necessary indication as to the nature of his thought, although one wishes he had dissociated himself faster than he did from such applications of his ideas. But it certainly points to the kind of thought appreciated in such milieus.

Let us state once more that Momigliano's and Ginzburg's accusations of »sympathies for Nazi culture« cannot be substantiated, and that the case should be dismissed. But Dumézil's ontological preference for ancient myths over present events, or his reading of the latter in the light of the former cannot be completely absolved. I shall give one last example. In 1927, Dumézil, who was then teaching in Istanbul, published in the *Revue Turque d'Anthropologie* an article entitled »De

38 See A. Schnapp; J. Svenbro, »Du Nazisme à »Nouvelle école«. Repères sur la prétendue Nouvelle Droite«, in: *Quaderni di Storia* 6 (11), 1980, 107-117, esp. note 22. See also M. Olender, »Georges Dumézil et les usages »politiques« de la préhistoire indo-européenne,« in: R.-P. Droit (ed.), *Les grecs, les romains et nous: l'antiquité est-elle moderne?*, Paris 1991, 191-225.

quelques faux massacres.« Dealing with some ancient famous stories of massacres, such as that reported in the book of Esther, he sought to show that these stories do not reflect massacres having actually taken place.

The American historian of religion Bruce Lincoln, whose work focuses on aspects of Indo-European religion, has dedicated many efforts to decipher the implicit and hidden ideological presuppositions and implications of various trends and attitudes in contemporary scholarship.³⁹ In particular, Lincoln has sought on various occasions to analyze the underlying currents in Dumézil's thought.⁴⁰ He has accused Dumézil of having written »De quelques faux masacres« in order to offer an intellectual model for the Turkish denial of the genocide of the Armenians.⁴¹ Despite its sophistication and Lincoln's obvious scholarly marshalling of the evidence, his argument has failed to convince me. But what remains is Dumézil's ability to foster his deep interest for ancient and powerful myths, while at the same time ignoring immediate facts, such as the mass murder of the Armenians in 1915 when writing in Istanbul in 1927, or the immediate significance of »aryans« in Paris in 1941. In the name of scholarly irrelevance, neither is deemed worth a footnote. Did such a footnote on the too real and too close massacre of the Armenians impose itself, or was it even legitimate, in a study of mythical massacres in ancient literatures? Perhaps not. But one should not forget that the paper was written and published in Istanbul, where there were very powerful interests seeking to erase from memory all traces of a terrible murder that had been perpetrated by the state authorities twelve years previously.⁴² The silence soon made about the Armenian genocide was not ignored by everybody, and Grottanelli has argued plausibly that at least one future »Aryan« leading ideologist, Rudolph Glauer, alias Rudolph von Sebottendorff, the former editor of the *Münchener Beobachter*, who was staying in Istanbul at the time, might well have read Dumézil's article.⁴³

39 Lincoln is well aware of the fact that his own Doktorvater, Mircea Eliade, is hardly free from the guilt of having flirted, when it was most serious, with violent ideologies of the right. One should add that in the thirties, a deep ambivalence with democracy was prevalent among European intellectuals.

40 See B. Lincoln, »Shaping the Past and the Future«, in: B. Lincoln, *Death, War, and Sacrifice: Studies in Ideology and Practice*, Chicago 1991, 231-234, a review of Dumézil's *L'oubli de l'homme et l'honneur des dieux*, originally published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, October 3, 1986. See further his »Kings, Rebels, and the Left Hand«, in: *Death, War, and Sacrifice...*, 244-258. Finally, see his most recent piece, »Rewriting the German War God: Dumézil, Politics and Scholarship in the Late 1930's«, in: *History of Religions* 37, 1998, 187-208.

41 B. Lincoln, »Myth and History in the Study of Myth: an Obscure Text of Georges Dumézil, its Context and Subtext«, in: B. Lincoln, *Death, War and Sacrifice...*, 232-268. Lincoln's accusation was originally published in *Quaderni di Storia* 32, 1990, 5-30.

42 Turkish heavy pressures against open discussion of the Armenian genocide are felt to this day, even, to my shame, in Israel, where, a few years ago, the Public Television Network was brought to cancel a planned program on the topic.

43 Sebottendorff bought the *Münchener Beobachter* in July 1918. In 1919, it was re-baptised *Völkischer Beobachter*. See R. von Sebottendorff, *Bevor Hitler kam*, Munich 1933. The book was translated into Italian by the Fascist figure Renato del Ponte, as *Prima che Hitler venisse* (*Storia della »Società Thule«*), Turin 1987. I thank Cristiano Grottanelli for calling my attention to this publication. See further C. Grottanelli, *Ideologie...*, 189-193. As Hitler said to his

As if a concentrated effort to understand ancient myths brought with it an amnesia about the recent past; as if too much long-span memory had to be paid by the atrophy of short-span memory. Last but not least, the role of the scholar is to understand, not to judge, even (or especially?) when dealing with highly delicate problems of personal behaviour in times of upheaval. It was Momigliano who launched the whole case about Dumézil's dubious sympathies; through him the scandal came. A fact which was probably never ignored by some Italian scholars has recently become public knowledge. Momigliano insisted that he understood too well the nature of totalitarian regimes, having lived in such a regime »for sixteen years, five months, one day and about eighteen hours.«⁴⁴ The young Momigliano himself, it appears, had not been a radical opponent to the fascist regime throughout those sixteen years, although he does not seem to have been much in sympathy with it at any time. Like anyone else unwilling to sacrifice his official position (since 1931, Momigliano was working for the government-financed *Enciclopedia Italiana*), he swore allegiance to the regime. As is well-known, only eleven University professors (but also numerous academics of lower rank) refused to take the oath of loyalty to the regime in 1931, when it was first demanded, and were consequently dismissed. What has become common knowledge only recently, however, from newly published sources, is Momigliano's membership in the Fascist Party until his expulsion from it for racial reasons in November 1938.⁴⁵ There is no reason to believe that this membership reflected a deep sympathy for »Fascist culture.« The young scholar, whose own father held for many years official positions in the Party hierarchy, probably thought that a nominal membership was a price worth paying for decent working conditions. It is hard to imagine today the living conditions under a totalitarian regime sixty years ago, and easier to condemn than to understand. One should certainly not throw the first stone at Momigliano, but one wishes he had remembered in his old age what another illustrious Jew said long ago about the mote and the beam (Mat. 7:1-5). When launching his allegations about the connection between Dumézil's interest in ancient myths and his infatuation with contemporary demons, he might have recalled his own party membership. That would have made him a sharper, more nuanced, and more honest intellectual historian of our dark century.

officers upon the launching of his conquest of Poland, »Who today remembers the massacre of the Armenians?«

44 See R. Di Donato, »Materiali per una biografia intellettuale di Arnaldo Momigliano«, in: *Athenaeum* 83, 1995, 213-244, esp. 243.

45 R. Di Donato, »Materiali...«, 219, note 25: »Vi comunico che dalla data odierna avete cessato di appartenere al PNF perché di razza ebraica,« reads a letter sent to him on 29. 11. 1938 by the secretary of the Fascist Party in Turin. See also C. Dionisotti, *Ricordo di Arnaldo Momigliano*, Bologna 1989, 18. Momigliano's membership in the Fascist Party was referred to by W.V. Harris, »The silences of Momigliano«, in: *Times Literary Supplement*, April 12, 1996, 6-7. This publication launched a polemic in the following issues of the *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS). See letters by O. Murray, in: TLS, May 3, 1996, T. J. Cornell, in: TLS, May 10, 1996, a response by Harris in: TLS, May 24, 1996, and a letter by C. Dionisotti, in: TLS, June 14, 1996. See now C. Dionisotti's last contribution to the topic, »Momigliano e il contesto«, in: *Belfagor* 52 (1997), 633-648, esp. 642-643, where Dionisotti explains Momigliano's inscription to the Fascist party as stemming from his desire to devote himself undisturbed to his studies.